

NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART

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Introduction

1 This, first of all, is a book about Nietzsche's philosophy of art, about his view of the genesis of art, of what makes good art good and bad art bad; about, above all, the relationship between art and life. Or rather, it is a book about Nietzsche's philosophies of art for, so runs a central thesis of the book, there is, in Nietzsche, no single view of art (or of very much else). Rather, his career divides up into different periods distinguished from each other by sharply contrasting attitudes to and about art. More specifically, I hold that Nietzsche's thought about art divides into *four* main periods. I also hold, however, that the fourth constitutes a return to the first. In the end, so I argue, the path described by Nietzsche's thought is a circular one.

Philosophy is distinguished by the fact that everything is connected with everything else. Of Nietzsche's philosophy this is even more true than usual. Thus this is not *just* a book about art. It is not just an essay in "aesthetics," for it turns out that it is not possible to discuss the development of Nietzsche's aesthetics without trying to understand his metaphysics, his fluctuating beliefs concerning the scope of human knowledge, concerning the nature and value of science (roughly, the higher his valuation of science the lower his valuation of art and vice versa) and concerning pessimism (roughly, the more seriously he takes pessimism the more seriously he takes art and vice versa). And when it comes to Nietzsche's later philosophy of art, it turns out that that cannot be understood without confronting the celebrated Nietzschean themes: the death of God, the eternal recurrence, and the idea of the *Übermensch* ("overman"). (Interestingly, though, the "will to power" turns out to be relatively *unimportant* – but that, it has always seemed to me, is a notion which figures much more prominently in commentaries than in the

texts themselves.) Hence what the book offers is a particular perspective on the development of Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole.

The work is organized chronologically. (Chapters 2 to 5 correspond to the four periods into which I claim Nietzsche's career falls.) It thus constitutes a kind of biography: not a biography in the usual sense but rather a *philosophical* biography, a record of the twists and turns taken by Nietzsche's philosophy viewed through the prism of his philosophy of art. The model it follows is supplied by Nietzsche himself; by his last book, *Ecce Homo*, the work which purports to be his philosophical autobiography. As in *Ecce Homo* the matter of this study is the life lived by Nietzsche *in* rather than outside of his writings, and as in *Ecce Homo* that life is viewed as falling into sharply separate phases, phases which nonetheless add up to a kind of unity, an *aesthetic* unity. Unlike *Ecce Homo*, however – in many ways a mendacious, deluded book – this study aims at *truthfulness*. In this respect it aims to be an improvement over its often questionable model.

Unlike *Ecce Homo*, too, this is a *critical* study of Nietzsche's thought. This sets it apart from what seems to me a regrettable trend in recent discussion of Nietzsche (at least in English), a trend to mere interpretation. There are, it seems to me, at least two, more or less conscious modes of thinking which underlie this trend. The first consists in thinking that since, according to Nietzsche's "perspectivism" (in chapter 4 I *reject* this interpretation of the doctrine), there are no truths but only interpretations, it follows that there is no definitive text to criticize and that all one can do is to offer interpretations that one finds appealing. The second and opposite tendency (one which would have delighted the author of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*) consists in elevating the texts to quasi-biblical status, in treating them as unquestionable repositories of profound and wonderful truth, the only task being that of recovering and articulating this truth.

Both of these ways of thinking are, I believe, to be avoided. The first because it is self-undermining – if there is no definitive text because of perspectivism then perspectivism is true (and a definitive part of the text) and there are, after all, some truths – and the second because it is blind. Whatever Nietzsche may have come to believe, ultimately, about his own infallibility (see the Epilogue below), the fact is that the texts are by no means that but are, along with their brilliance and insight, full of prejudice dressed up as philosophy,

manipulative rhetoric, and, on occasion, atrociously poor argumentation.

Criticism of Nietzsche is legitimate. There *is* definitive text, or rather texts, and their character is not as difficult to discover as is often pretended. And it is vital. Otherwise, having entered that Nietzschean maze, one never finds one's way out again.

2 My first chapter is about Schopenhauer. It is well known that as a young man Nietzsche was deeply impressed by the great pessimist and that his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was written under his influence. The general view is that after this relatively brief, youthful infatuation Nietzsche turned in the direction of "health" and away from Schopenhauer's philosophy of "sickness": that thereafter Schopenhauer figures in Nietzsche's thought only as the "antipode" of himself and his philosophy. And this, certainly, is the view put about by Nietzsche himself: whereas the early writings refer to Schopenhauer in terms of almost religious veneration, the later writings refer to him almost always as an epitome of sickness, "decadence," and error.

I oppose this view of things. *The Birth of Tragedy*, I shall argue (in ch. 2), was (not just cosmetically but fundamentally) influenced by, in particular, Schopenhauer's metaphysics and his philosophy of art. And on the crucial question of pessimism, the Schopenhauerian assessment of the worth of human existence is, I shall suggest, endorsed. In the middle of his life Nietzsche turned against pessimism and against Schopenhauer. But in the end, reluctantly and making every rhetorical effort to disguise this from us and, more importantly, from himself, he came back, I shall argue, to pessimism. Though Schopenhauer's *name* is never rehabilitated – to do so would have been to admit to that which Nietzsche was trying so hard to conceal – his essential spirit, his pessimism, lives as strongly in Nietzsche's final works as in his first.

But even on the view that Schopenhauer really *is* the antipode of Nietzsche's later philosophy he remains the crucial figure to an understanding of Nietzsche (crucial, on *this* view, somewhat in the way that Catholicism is crucial to the psychology of the lapsed Catholic). From any point of view Schopenhauer is vital to the understanding of Nietzsche. Except for the Greeks, there is no other philosopher he knew with anything like the same intimacy. His writings, all of them, are full not just of quotations and paraphrases

from Schopenhauer, but of phrases, allusions and rhythms both conscious and unconscious. Nietzsche *breathed* Schopenhauer and cannot be understood without him.

3 Any work on Nietzsche has to express a policy with respect to the *Nachlass*, in particular with respect to that portion of it published posthumously as *The Will to Power*. It has now been established¹ that far from *The Will to Power* constituting, as Heidegger and many others have held, his "philosophy proper," a philosophy he would have eventually published had not madness and death intervened, over three-quarters of the entries were, in fact, never intended for publication at all. What follows is that (1) no interpretative thesis must be based on *The Will to Power* alone, and (2) passages from that work must never be given interpretative precedence over passages from published works. Their sole legitimate use is as clarifications of, and expansions upon, that which Nietzsche published. In general, it seems to me, the distinction between the public and private is very important with respect to Nietzsche. Like many people, he used private notes to *entertain* (not affirm) a variety of positions with respect to a given issue. The act of affirmation was the act of publication. Nietzsche's celebrated self-contradictions are greatly diminished if this is borne in mind (together with the fact that to change one's mind over time is not to contradict oneself).